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## Two New Additions Bring Great Beauty to the Art Museum

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BY STEVEN ROSEN · DECEMBER 4TH, 2013 · THE BIG PICTURE

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*"Momiji no zu (View of Maple Leaves)" by Nakamura Takuo - Photo: Kichiro Okamura, provided courtesy of Joan B. Mirviss Ltd.*

The Cincinnati Art Museum lately has been concentrating on what it calls “node” shows — small-to-medium-size exhibitions and gallery changes highlighting its collection or local angles.

The bigger shows with a national/international focus will return in a year or so when the new Western & Southern Gallery for special exhibitions is complete.

But in the meantime, the two most beautiful presentations I’ve seen at the museum this year are both up now. One is a new gallery - the second-floor Folk Art gallery — and the other a show called *Taming the Elements* that displays contemporary Japanese prints and ceramics. It is up through Jan. 5.

The Folk Art gallery has a surprising and offbeat appearance (for an art museum), with its harvest-orange walls. In addition to painting the new gallery has large three-dimensional pieces on platforms and in glass cases, and smaller ones on shelving high up toward the ceiling. The feel is non-traditional, like a cabin in the woods.

“We wanted something fun and lively, to make it distinct from the other galleries and reflect the idiosyncratic nature of what’s in the gallery,” says Julie Aronson, curator of American painting, sculpture and drawings, who created the gallery in late August with Amy Dehan, decorative arts and design curator.

The first object that greets you upon entering the gallery is — fittingly for a “fun and lively” gallery — a guitar, in a glass case in the room’s center. It looks immaculate with its parts shimmering in the light, ready to be picked up and played. Its curvy wooden body surrounds a white circular center made of ivory substitute

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This recent gift was created between 1950-1980 by Chester Cornett, who lived in southeastern Kentucky before he moved to Cincinnati and Lawrenceburg, Ind., in the 1970s.

To its left, standing on a platform and looking quite satisfied, is a large wooden pig — its body showing worn, black paint. This piece, 2011 gift, is from a 19th century butcher shop and was a signal of what was inside for people who couldn’t read.

The gallery has other delights, including examples of what one would call “traditional” folk art and of “outsiders.” Mixing the two here makes one wonder about the need for such labels. Some work in the gallery is from Robert Lewis’ 2007 gift to the museum.

There are about 30 pieces in total here — paintings, sculpture, a large carved pipe suspended from the wall, even a toy kitchen. It’s a bright cheerful place, one wishes you could grill out here.

The second-floor exhibit *Taming the Elements*, in comparison, has a contemplative quality and a fragility that invites introspection rather than high-spiritedness. Its 35 objects or so were chosen by Dehan and Kristin Spangenberg, curator of prints, drawings and photographs. The prints mostly come from the museum’s Howard and Caroline Porter Collection; the ceramics (more sculptural than functional) are on loan from the Jeffrey and Carol Horvitz Collection.

To say it’s like a walk through a Zen garden isn’t pure simile. One of the show’s sections matches prints depicting those gardens (Hashimoto Okiie’s 1959 color woodcut “Stone Garden” and Maeda Masao’s 1960 “Ryoan-ji Garden”) with appropriate ceramic work. Sugiura Yasuyoshi’s 1980 glazed-stoneware “To No Ishi (Rock),” a “rock” with gray-and-white swirls around its exterior, is like a whole Zen garden compressed into one small object.

There is much else to admire for seeming to be simple while actually revealing dedicated craftsmanship and thoughtfulness. The work is contemporary Japanese, but also relates to Minimalism. In the way it uses lines on paper to break through geometric restraints and conjure the infinite, Kato Shiro’s 1981 color lithograph “Being Paper on Paper” shows Agnes Martin’s influence.

A piece that seems totally free is Hamaguchi Yozo’s 1971 color lithograph “Vase and Cherries.” A bright-red cherry floats in dark-red space, its tiny stem serving as a propeller. The colorful vase at the print’s bottom is only partially depicted.

The art museum has other shows and gallery changes now up that are worthy of attention. *Degas, Renoir and Poetic Pastels* — the presentation by Esther Bell, new curator of European paintings, drawings and sculpture — especially makes a strong impact with its excellent gallery design. But these two have lured me back several times for their outstanding appeal, and I’ll go again soon.

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